

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
(1525-ca. 1880)

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
St. Helena Island

THE SLAVE COMMUNITY

133

from among his own slaves. A wedding was often made the occasion of a general celebration on the plantation. The master gave special provisions, such as beef and rice for making a stew, and molasses for sweetened water to wash it down, and the young ladies made the cake.²⁰ The mistress and her daughters also influenced the bride to come to the ceremony properly gowned in white with a flowing veil improvised from a discarded window curtain from the master's house. The mistress might provide this extra finery or the bride herself might purchase it with her hoarded savings. If it were the marriage of a house servant, the ceremony might be performed in the kitchen or dining room of the "big house" or in a nearby grove of trees. Marriages of field hands were frequently performed in the open or in the praise house, as the plantation church was called.

After the feasting and the merrymaking were over, the couple went home to the cabin which the master or overseer had set aside for them. But they did not always go home destined to remain faithful to the vows which they had just taken. The looseness of the slave's code of morality was one of the evils most often cited against him.²¹ Despite the preachers' instructions upon the nature, sacredness, and perpetuity of marriage many slaves did not hold themselves to such a doctrine. This circumstance is not surprising when one considers the polygamous customs of their African ancestors and the failure of law either to recognize or protect Negro marriages. The issue of an extra-marital relation placed but little additional

²⁰ Murray, *Letters from the United States*, p. 224.

²¹ Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States*, I, 272, 273.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
(1525-ca. 1880)

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
St. Helena Island

134

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE SEA ISLANDS

567 burden upon the parents, for the master provided for all
585 children alike. A violation of marriage vows was accom-
• 837 panied by no disgrace or punishment other than that in-
567 flicted by the master or by the church if the culprit were
(144) a member. There seems to have been very little intimacy
between the white men and the Negro women on St.
Helena Island. The northern missionaries found not
more than five or six mulattoes on the whole Island in
1861.

567 There were forces sufficiently strong to keep many
581 slaves faithful to their marriage vows. Chancellor Har-
per, of Charleston, called attention in 1854 to the fact that
slave marriages were often faithfully adhered to during
life.²¹⁹ In 1857 a sea-island planter, in recounting the
deaths among his people, mentioned with sadness that of
"poor old Sandy and his wife Joan." "The latter died
567 apparently of mere debility; and her husband, after watch-
581 ing until her death, went to bed at midnight, complaining
593 merely of a sore throat, and expired the next evening with-
(165) out any one suspecting that he was seriously ill." The
planter concluded that the faithful old man had died of
"mental depression, operating on a feeble constitution."²²⁰
On Edisto Island there still lives "Old Jeff," born in
slavery, who, although as devoted to his wife as Sandy,
lived on after her death. Every day he went to her grave
to mourn and there he slept at night. After several
months his friends became alarmed at his behavior. Upon
being questioned he explained that he intended to dig up

²¹⁹ "Memoir on Slavery," DeBow, *Industrial Resources of the United States*, II,

219.

²²⁰ Couper-Wyllie Papers, James Hamilton Couper to James Couper, April 13,
1857.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930

(1525-ca. 1880)

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23

South Carolina

St. Helena Island

THE SLAVE COMMUNITY

135

his wife's bones and take them to his house so that he could have 'he wit' me always."²⁴

FAMILY LIFE

In their attempt to impress the sacredness of marriage upon their slaves, the whites were often discouraged by the low value which the slave women placed upon chastity. Wives were as prone as husbands to break the marriage vows. In fact, the female tended to be the dominant sex in slave life. It was decidedly to the advantage of a black man to have the good will of one of the women of the plantation, for life thereby was made much easier. On the plantations where clothes were issued by the yard, it was customary for the women to do the sewing for the family so that a husband was almost as dependent upon his wife for a new suit of clothes as he was upon his master; but, on the plantations where superannuated women were delegated to do all the plantation sewing and mending, the slave men were somewhat more independent of their women.

The weekly issuance of rations, a predominant portion of which was corn, was also dealt out in the bulk and must not only be shelled but pounded into grits before being cooked. It was customary for the women and children to assemble at the cornhouse on Monday, an hour or so before "fust dark," to receive the weekly allowance from the driver. Kneeling or sitting upon the ground with her children about her, each woman shelled the corn, using a cob to increase her speed. On some of the plantations there were improvised mortars for shelling corn, made of

²⁴ Information obtained from J. Swinton Whaley, Little Edisto, S. C., and from a personal interview with the Negro.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930

(1525-ca. 1880)

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23

South Carolina

St. Helena Island

"CONTRABAND OF WAR"

179

I learned that old Nat's boy, Antony, who wanted to marry Phillis, had given her up and taken Mary Ann, July's daughter, without saying a word to me or any other white man. I called him up to me one afternoon when I was there and told him he must go to church and be married by the minister according to law. He flatly refused, with a good deal of impertinence, using some profane language learned at camp. I thereupon told him he must go home with me, showing him I had a pistol, which I put in my outside pocket. He came along, swearing all the way and muttering his determination not to comply. I gave him lodging in the dark hole under the stairs, with nothing to eat. Next morning old Nat came and expostulated with him, joined by old Ben and Uncle Sam, all of whom pitched into him and told him he was very foolish and ought to be proud of such a chance. He finally gave up and promised to go. So I let him off with an apology. Next Sunday he appeared and was married before a whole church full of people.⁴⁸

But the missionaries found to their sorrow that the Negroes did not always have the proper respect for "a marriage according to law." Limus, a driver, had a wife and grown children on his own plantation and another wife on a plantation nearby. Nevertheless, the missionaries tried to settle such cases with a due regard for the parties concerned and attempted to build up among the people a feeling of family loyalty and pride. They urged the Negroes to buy a table whenever possible and to have regular times for the family meal when all should assemble for, the occasion.

Pierce at once opened the two white churches on St. Helena Island which had been closed since "gun shoot." Among the superintendents there were several divinity students and ministers who preached to the Negroes on

⁴⁸ Letters from Port Royal, p. 95.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930

(1525-ca. 1880)

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23

South Carolina

St. Helena Island

THE AFTERMATH

207

ob de house blow 'way an' seem like ebery minute de house go too;
so we hab to get out.

He ben da'k now, an' where to go, dat's de trouble. To make de misery wuss, de rain seem like he bus' de sky open to fall top we-uns. We get on de side ob de house where de win' can't lick we so rash, an' dere we stan' de lib-long night, jus' like a passel ob turkeys wid dey head down. De watuh get higher an' higher. We ain't know den dat de tide keep a risin' all night an' nebber go down a-tall. Fus' it ben to ma knees, den cum up to ma wain' . . . I hold on to de window sill tell ma arms seem like dey drap off. When de blessed daylight cum at las,' sich a weepin' an' wailin' in de lan'! I wish I ben dead, for all los' something: some dere house, some dere animals, an' some dere wife an' chillun. So much sorrow an' misery I nebber want to see agen!²²

In 1911 a similar tidal wave, less disastrous than that of 1893, again swept away crops, homes, and live stock. In both instances Penn School, in 1893 under the guidance of Miss Towne with the assistance of the Red Cross and in 1911 under that of Miss Rossa B. Cooley and Miss Grace B. House, carried out the relief work and greatly aided the stricken people in beginning life anew.²³

THE NEGRO AS A CITIZEN

A gaunt woman of uncertain age leaned dejectedly against the door of her little cabin, two small children pulling at her skirts, airing herself in the hot sun of the summer of 1865 as though trying to rid her soul of misery. Her story was mournful enough. She had been sick. She had hired a woman to do her work. Her husband, Tony, had taken a fancy to the other woman, and after a while

²² Claire I. Macdonald, *Recollections of Juliana*, pp. 16-17.

²³ See annual *Report of Penn Normal, Industrial and Agricultural School for 1912* and MS, "Storm of 1911" in files of Penn School.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930

(1525-ca. 1880)

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23

South Carolina

St. Helena Island

208

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE SEA ISLANDS

175
837
684
had gone away with her and "married." She had begged him to return and so he did, but after a few months he had gone off again to live with the other wife down the road a few tasks away. He was in the meeting-house yonder, a prayin' now.²⁴

175
178
592
(848)
After Reconstruction, one heard fewer of such stories on St. Helena, for the church officials attempted to discipline all offenders. Although there were fewer cases of desertion, illegitimacy was none the less frequent despite the "churching." The significant change in family life was the elevated status of the husband. In attempting to stabilize family life, the superintendents and teachers had appealed to the man as the head of the family and had urged him to assume his rightful responsibilities. Black men who had been accustomed to the dominance of women during slavery came now to warn their wives to keep their places. The land which they bought from the Government was in their own names and they came to look upon the house as theirs, not that of their wives as in slavery days.

175
346
175
794
793
Freedom brought few changes in the religious life of the people. They still clung to their plantation praise houses, but instead of one praise house to a plantation they occasionally had as many as two or three. Besides this they built a few new churches, for "Brick Church" was too near Ladies Island to be within convenient reach of all the Islanders. But their church forms they changed very little except to make the praise house leaders subject to the Negro preachers of their churches whereas during antebellum days they had been subject to the white ministers.

²⁴ See Reid, *After the War*, p. 106n.